

Learning What Works

Evidence from SRDC's social experiments and research

September 2013

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Our new website

SRDC launched its new website on August 8, 2013. The site retains the www.srdc.org address but introduces a new look, new features, and enhanced operability. Our areas of policy practice figure prominently on the home page, enabling visitors to easily browse our current and recently completed projects. The new design also includes multiple routes to publications and reports.

The site incorporates modular content management features that will enable more frequent updates of project news, product releases, and our publication database. We hope that you will take some time to explore the new site and provide us with comments at info@srdc.org.

British Columbia Centre for Employment Excellence completes first year

The BC Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation selected SRDC, through a competitive process, to establish the BC Centre for Employment Excellence one year ago. SRDC was delighted to have been selected to launch the new Centre.

The Centre is an independent research and knowledge-sharing organization created to act as a single coordination point for research on employment in BC. It connects the BC employment services sector and the employer community with the best and emerging information about employment and training programs, practices, and resources. The creation of the Centre is a natural complement to the new Employment Program of BC (EPBC) implemented on April 2, 2012. EPBC replaced a range of provincial and federal programs with the intention of serving job seekers with an integrated approach and consistent services across communities in the province.

It was a productive first year for the Centre. The Centre launched its website and Knowledge Clearinghouse with news and information on emerging and best practices, resources, and tools to support practitioners (<http://www.cfeebc.org>). The Centre kicked off its free, monthly webinar series in June. Chris Arnold, Clinical Director of the Provincial Networking Group, recently presented on *Networking and Relationship Building with Employers*.

In addition to implementing the website, the Centre completed work on two research projects addressing knowledge gaps in the employment services sector. The first is an environmental scan of employment programs offered in BC. The second examines the skills and professional development needs of career development practitioners. The Centre anticipates implementing several innovative demonstration and research projects soon and providing solid evidence about what works in employment programs and services.

For more information [contact Susanna Lui Gurr](#).

Microloans for foreign credential recognition

Employment and Social Development Canada launched the Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) Loans Pilot in 2012. The program aims to reduce the financial barriers in the FCR process and improve employment prospects for internationally-trained workers (ITWs) through loans provided by community organizations and financial institutions. SRDC has been retained to design a research framework that will guide the collection of evidence on what works in the different models implemented by community organizations and, more broadly, on the financial and other barriers faced by ITWs in Canada.

The program can trace its roots back to Parliament's Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, which recognized that lack of credential recognition played a large role in the poor labour market outcomes of recent immigrants. The Committee recommended that the government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to create a loan program for immigrants to access foreign credential recognition programs. The Government subsequently announced its intentions to implement such a program in its 2011 Budget.

The FCR Loans Pilot is unique in its application of microloans to an educated clientele of immigrants in an advanced economy. Microloan programs are typically found in developing countries and targeted towards a clientele with limited access to commercial sources of credit. According to recent studies, the results of microloan programs have been mixed in these contexts. However, there are plausible reasons to believe why microloans could make a difference in the employment outcomes for ITWs.

The FCR Loans Pilot provides the opportunity to learn more about how a microloan program can work in a developed country. It will examine who receives loans, how much they receive, how the money is used, and how it affects their FCR activities, employment, and other outcomes. Since the program is being delivered by nine different service providers with common and unique parameters across pilot sites, it provides the opportunity to maximize the lessons learned from the diversity of models tested and the contexts in which they are tested.

For more information [contact Louise Legault](#).

SRDC helping to “raise the grade”

The decisions teenagers make regarding school and work can have effects lasting well into their adult lives. While youth who graduate from high school and go on to post-secondary education are well poised to reap economic, health, and social benefits from those decisions, those who drop out of high school are extremely disadvantaged in today’s knowledge economy and are at much greater risk of negative health and social outcomes. The difference is often a matter of information, resources, expectations, and support.

The Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada (BGCC) is a national charitable organization dedicated to helping young people grow into healthy, confident, contributing adults. With funding from the Rogers Youth Fund and guidance from SRDC and others, BGCC has developed *Raising the Grade*, a new after-school program at 35 participating Clubs for teenagers at risk of dropping out of school. *Raising the Grade* offers academic support, mentoring, a scholarship, and career discovery, all in the context of new technical centres which provide state-of-the-art tech, software, and productive space for info sharing, peer support, and connected learning. *Raising the Grade* aims to help at-risk students become more engaged in school through digital learning – exploring what’s important to them, developing 21st century skills, and discovering how schoolwork can help them meet their personal objectives. See the [Raising the Grade website](#) for more information.

SRDC has been engaged to evaluate *Raising the Grade’s* implementation and outcomes, based on our experience with similar projects such as *Future to Discover*, *AVID*, and *Life After High School*. Given the innovative nature of the program, we are taking a developmental evaluation approach – working collaboratively with stakeholders, providing continuous feedback and reflection on the program’s development and early implementation, and helping to develop capacity for ongoing program monitoring and improvement. This approach is particularly appropriate for identifying what features of an innovative program work well (and for whom, and under what conditions) and what adjustments might improve effectiveness. As *Raising the Grade* moves into its second year of operation, SRDC will work closely with BGCC and participating Clubs to understand how the program operates in different environments, and what elements resonate most with youth.

For more information [contact Heather Smith Fowler](#).

Performance-based funding: Can it improve essential skills outcomes?

A recent study by SRDC and Workplace Education Manitoba explores the current state of knowledge on performance-based funding and its application to Essential Skills programs. The study, funded by the federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, involved a review of the literature, an expert panel, and a presentation at the 2012 Canadian Economics Association Annual Meetings. The panel included Jeff Smith of the University of Michigan, Arthur Sweetman of McMaster University, and Sergei Bouslov from BC's Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation.

There is growing international consensus that despite spending billions of dollars on social programs each year, we are simply not making rapid enough progress on our most pressing social challenges. In response, governments around the world have begun to change the way they spend to foster innovation and encourage the development of more effective solutions. Governments are increasingly focusing on improving performance by setting outcome-related goals and paying service providers for achieving these goals.

Our study explored whether these types of outcomes-based payment models could improve the effectiveness of Essential Skills programs. We found that while outcomes-based funding models vary widely in their design, the research literature consistently demonstrates that even small amounts of performance funding may change provider behaviour. But, an equally important finding was that not all changes are in the desired direction. The implementation of outcomes-based funding models is almost always associated with significant unintended consequences such as increased gaming or strategic behaviour on the part of service providers. The good news is that there is emerging evidence that outcomes-based funding models can be successfully designed to improve outcomes if they are based on a measurement framework that *establishes timely and meaningful connections between day-to-day providers' practice and performance*. These connections enable service delivery providers to better understand where and why clients succeed and where and why they falter, and they provide incentives to providers to adjust, shift, and innovate their practice accordingly.

In our full report, we draw on this evidence to identify lessons learned and guiding principles for identifying a model that works. Based on these principles, we recommend that any effort to apply performance-based funding to Essential Skills delivery should be carefully designed to establish links between practice and performance, encourage progress along the employment continuum, and foster collaboration not competition among providers.

[Read the full report.](#) For more information [contact Karen Myers.](#)

Innovative approach to increase employment among long-term welfare recipients

SRDC is running a trial of a new approach to increase employment among long-term income assistance recipients in British Columbia. The approach — motivational interviewing — has been adopted for several years in the fields of addiction and criminal justice, but it has only very recently been applied in income assistance. The project is sponsored by Employment and Social Development Canada and run in collaboration with British Columbia's Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation.

Motivational interviewing is a collaborative, person-centered form of guidance that is intended to elicit and strengthen clients' motivation for change in their lives. The project has trained employment plan workers and case managers to use motivational interviewing with a program group of long-term income assistance recipients. SRDC will compare the outcomes of the program group over time with a control group of recipients whose employment-focused meetings do not involve this approach.

Income assistance recipients seeking work may face many barriers: physical challenges, lack of education or essential skills, health problems, and negative experiences with past employers. Even among those with marketable skills and solid labour market experience, work interruptions due to slack labour market conditions or personal issues may sap their enthusiasm for the job hunt. Motivational interviewing is a promising intervention that could help them overcome ambivalence towards becoming more "job ready."

The trial includes two main components. An implementation analysis will assess the planning, process development, training, and monitoring tools required to successfully integrate motivational interviewing into the suite of employment services for income assistance recipients across different agencies. An impact analysis will focus on the effects of motivational interviewing on the attitudes and labour market outcomes of program participants.

For more information [contact Reuben Ford](#).

Promoting youth mental health in the transition to post-secondary education

Youth mental health is rapidly emerging as a public policy priority in Canada. The school environment is increasingly seen as a key influence on young people's mental health, and an important venue for delivering mental health services, both at the post-secondary level and in grades K-12. Several recent policy documents identify educational transitions — such as when youths leave high school — as times of increased vulnerability to poor mental health.

To inform the design of a possible intervention, SRDC conducted a review of the research literature on school-based mental health and an environmental scan of existing programs promoting mental health for senior students as they leave high school. The resulting report describes related concepts and the academic literature on student mental health promotion, identifies relevant programs, and outlines what we consider to be important components of an intervention to support students through this transition. The ultimate aim of such an initiative would be to equip senior students with the knowledge, skills, and resources they need to cope with, adapt to, and thrive in their next phase as emerging adults.

Future work will focus on developing the parameters and content of an intervention, in collaboration with key partners in the mental health and educational sectors.

[Read the full report.](#)

For more information [contact Heather Smith Fowler](#).

SRDC studies featured at Student Financial Aid conference

SRDC projects covering access to post-secondary education figured prominently in the June 2013 annual meeting of the Canadian Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators in Ottawa. SRDC CEO Jean-Pierre Voyer and research director Reuben Ford each appeared twice in the two-day program, presenting projects that ranged from administrative data analysis to experimental economics to large-scale random control trials. [See the full program.](#)

In the first breakout session, Reuben Ford reported on a recent analysis of Canada Student Loans Plan administrative data conducted for Employment and Social Development Canada. The project explored the possibility of using statistical models to target interventions for those at greatest risk of being delinquent or in default on their student loans. The study concluded that, given available data resources, modeling could provide useful information to Plan managers but was not sufficiently accurate to guide intervention targeting. [View the presentation.](#)

Mr. Voyer's first presentation addressed the issue of why some groups continue to have lower participation in post-secondary education despite a number of financing options. An experiment was designed to test whether certain groups were sensitive to increases in the price of post-secondary education or were reluctant to finance their education through student loans. The study found that some groups — including those from lower-income families, with less educated parents, those identifying with Aboriginal groups, and boys — were indeed more sensitive to price increases. Results also confirmed the presence of aversion to student loans among these groups. [Read the executive summary.](#)

Two secondary school programs intended to increase post-secondary participation among under-represented groups were presented in later sessions. Each of the interventions was tested by means of a randomized control trial.

Life After High School helped grade 12 students in BC work through post-secondary program choices, application processes, and financing options. The aim was to make post-secondary attendance the “default” option — a key behavioural economics concept. Although the program did not result in a widespread increase in post-secondary attendance, participants were more likely to receive financial aid and in greater amounts than non-participants. [Read the final report.](#)

Future to Discover tested two longer-term interventions separately and in combination: a series of career education planning workshops conducted in grades 10 through 12 and a bursary linked to the completion of those school years. The workshops were tested in New Brunswick and Manitoba, the bursaries only in New Brunswick. For both interventions, the most consistent impacts were noted among New Brunswick Francophones — a result thought to be related to a larger supply of openings in French-language community college programs. Among Anglophones, the workshops had a positive impact for boys in Manitoba and New Brunswick and for those from lower-income, less educated families in New Brunswick. The combination of workshops and bursaries increased post-secondary participation for most groups, most notably Anglophone boys. [Read the executive summary.](#)

Surveys can only do so much

At the 2013 Summer Institute for essential skills researchers and practitioners, SRDC research director David Gyarmati and senior research associate Boris Palameta were invited to speak on the differing roles of cross-sectional surveys and demonstration projects in relation to policy and service delivery. The over-arching theme of the presentation was that surveys can identify policy challenges and motivate change, but demonstration projects are required to measure the direct effects of policy programs and interventions.

Mr. Gyarmati and Mr. Palameta presented results from three demonstration projects: UPSKILL: Essentials to Excel, the British Columbia Workplace Training Program, and Measures of Success.

UPSKILL is a large-scale randomized control trial funded by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) of Employment and Social Development Canada. The project examines the outcomes of employees randomly selected to participate in a workplace essential skills training versus a control group that doesn't receive the training.

Measures of Success, also funded by OLES, involved a partnership of the Centre for Literacy, Workplace Education Manitoba, and Nova Scotia's Department of Labour and Advanced Education to which SRDC provided research and evaluation services. The goal of the project was to measure the long-term outcomes of ongoing workplace literacy and essential skills programs. [Read the final report.](#)

The British Columbia Workplace Training Program, led by Douglas College and funded through the Canada-British Columbia Labour Market Agreement, was designed to provide essential skills training to retail, food, and beverage workers. SRDC participated in the design of the project and conducted the evaluation of its outcomes.

Using examples from these projects, the presentation demonstrates that:

1. Well-designed workplace training programs can significantly improve literacy and numeracy skill scores;
2. Increases in employee essential skills can contribute to measurable workplace performance indicators such as customer relations and problem solving; and
3. Understanding and effectively measuring the workplace context and the characteristics of learners are essential to determining comprehensive program impacts and return on investment.

[View the presentation.](#)

The overall theme for the Summer Institute was Learning from IALS and preparing for PIAAC. IALS and PIAAC are internationally-comparable literacy surveys that have been the main tools for essential skills measurement and research in recent years. [See the complete program.](#)

SRDC focuses on education issues at 2013 Canadian Economics Association Meetings

SRDC research director Reuben Ford organized a session on Removing Financial Barriers to Post-secondary Education at the Canadian Economics Association meetings in Montreal. The session, chaired by Atiq Rahman of Employment and Social Development Canada, featured presentations by senior research associate Shek-wai (Taylor) Hui on predicting student loan delinquency and default; Dr. Ford on the BC Life After High School project; and research associate Douwre Grekou on manageable student debt thresholds. Dr. Ford also presented the results of an intervention designed to increase the post-secondary participation of middle-achieving high-school students, while Dr. Hui chaired a session on Education and Training.

Dr. Hui presented an analysis of Canada Student Loans Plan administrative data conducted for Employment and Social Development Canada and co-authored by Drs. Grekou and Hui. The study explored the possibility of using statistical models to target interventions for those at greatest risk of being delinquent or in default on their student loans. The study concluded that, given available data resources, modeling could provide useful information to Plan managers but was not sufficiently accurate to guide intervention targeting. [View the presentation.](#)

Life After High School, the subject of Dr. Ford's presentation, was an experimental program that helped selected grade 12 students in BC work through post-secondary program choices, application processes, and financing options. The aim was to make post-secondary attendance the “default” option — a key behavioural economics concept. Although the program did not result in a widespread increase in post-secondary attendance, participants were more likely to receive financial aid and in greater amounts than non-participants. The study's authors include Dr. Ford and Prof. Phil Oreopoulos of the University of Toronto. [Read the final report.](#)

With post-secondary costs and student borrowing increasing, many are concerned about how graduates manage their debt loads. Dr. Grekou reported on a project funded by Alberta Enterprise and Advanced Education and co-authored by Dr. Hui that examined indicators of manageable student debt. The project explored conceptual issues related to debt manageability through a literature review and interviews with student debt counselors, administrators, and lenders. The concepts were applied to Statistics Canada data to calculate multiple indicators of student debt manageability. [View the presentation.](#)

In a session on Policy and Program Effects on Education, Dr. Ford discussed the results of a randomized control trial targeted at middle-achieving secondary students. AVID is a well-established program that seeks to raise the academic achievement of these students through an elective class offered in each year of high school. The class teaches students how to study, ask questions, prepare for written work, read for content, take notes, work collaboratively, manage time, and become more organized.

Paris Colloquium on Active Labour Market Policies

SRDC CEO Jean-Pierre Voyer and research director David Gyarmati presented an evaluation of the Community Employment Innovation Project (CEIP) at a conference hosted by the French Ministry of Employment, Training and Social Dialogue in February 2013. The colloquium brought together academic, government, and NGO researchers from Europe and North America to examine recent evidence on the effectiveness of active labour market policies for job seekers, communities, and government funding agencies.

In contrast to passive income support programs such as employment insurance and social assistance, active labour market policies seek to improve employment opportunities for job seekers through programmed interventions. David Card of the University of California – Berkeley characterized interventions into three categories: job search assistance, training, and direct employment.

SRDC's presentation described a direct employment program uniquely focused on the social economy. The Community Employment Innovation Project was a randomized control trial of an employment program for Employment Insurance and Social Assistance recipients. Participants in the program were provided with three years of employment in community-relevant tasks proposed by local boards. A multi-level evaluation assessed costs and benefits for participants, communities, government, and society as a whole. Overall, benefits were greatest at the community level. [View the presentation](#). [Read the executive summary](#).

Dr. Card's review of the literature noted some patterns in the returns to each type of intervention. Search assistance tended to yield better short-term outcomes, particularly in decreasing unemployment duration. Training can sometimes yield longer-term, mostly modest benefits for participants. Taking a more macro view, John Martin from the OECD presented evidence that spending on active labour market programs is correlated with reductions in the incidence and persistence of unemployment.

The Colloquium provided evidence of a surge in interest in policy experimentation and demonstration projects in the European Union. The program was fuelled by well-established policy research programs in countries such as France, Germany, and Denmark and covered a range of active labour market interventions.

[See the complete program and presentations](#).

New home for SRDC's Toronto office

The Toronto office has relocated to a new suite at 481 University Avenue, Suite 705, Toronto, ON M5G 2E9. The office is managed by research director Karen Myers and currently includes senior research associate Grace Tse Tong, research associates Natalie Conte and Tharsni Kankesan, and researcher Layton Reynolds.

Articles we like

Can the government play Moneyball? How a new era of fiscal scarcity could make Washington work better.

The Atlantic Monthly. July/August 2013.

Two former officials from the Obama and Bush administrations argue that tightening government budgets are creating the necessary conditions for an increased focus on the effectiveness of program spending. “Moneyball” is a reference to a small budget baseball team, the Oakland As, using statistical analysis to build a team that outperformed most large budget competitors. The authors describe significant barriers to the application of statistical and other empirical evaluation techniques to the assessment of the efficiency of entrenched government programs. However, they are optimistic that the fiscal environment and promising models, such as the US Department of Education’s Investing in Innovation (i3) program and New York’s Center for Economic Opportunity, will lead to a greater demand for program data collection, analysis, and informed decision-making.

[Read the article.](#)